Develop, Not Judge: Continuous Assessment in the ESL Classroom

By Carol A. Puhl

One suspects that the global influences affecting education and how we assess it will soon reach into most classes in the world. One consequence of these global influences, such as changes in the world economy, the information revolution, environmentalism, and cross-national health threats, is the move away from the heavy use of traditional, more judgmental approaches to assessment toward alternative, more inclusive means of determining what learners know and can do. Along with this move is a thoughtful re-examination of just what we want from our learners in our English language classrooms worldwide.

In 1994 South Africa held the first truly democratic election ever. The country's new constitution, adopted in December 1996, was framed with input and discussion at all levels. With emphasis on human rights, it was created by drawing on the best democracies in the world. In this same spirit South Africa has committed to not just reforming but transforming its educational system nation-wide by the year 2003. Its major policies, outcomes-based education and continuous assessment, offer relevance to teachers and learners worldwide.

The focus of this article is on one aspect of this transformation, the implementation of continuous assessment in the ESL classroom. In a country of eleven official languages, where about 92% of the 44 million people have a mother tongue other than English and where English seems to be functioning as an unofficial language of wider communication, this is no small matter.

Why Continuous Assessment is Important

Continuous assessment (CA) acknowledges that we cannot change the instructional process unless we change the assessment process. It has been widely accepted that testing greatly influences instruction; and narrow testing has meant narrow instruction, teaching done "to the test." In order to transform the whole educational process, the change to assessment is being made hand-in-hand with the change to outcomes-based education.

Outcomes-based education (OBE) in many places offers broad cross-curricular statements, or "essential outcomes," of how we want our learners to be, resulting from formal education and from life-long learning. Some examples of essential outcomes from 1996 South African national education documents include the following abilities of learners:

- Reflect on and use a variety of learning strategies and enhance lifelong learning;
- Solve problems and make responsible decisions using critical and creative thinking;
- Work with others as a member of a team/group/organization/community;
- Deal with information critically;

- Communicate effectively using visual, mathematical, and language skills;
- Use science and technology critically, showing responsibility towards the environment and the health of others;
- Participate as responsible citizens locally, nationally, and globally;
- Show culture and aesthetic sensitivity;
- Make wise and safe choices for healthy living;
- Explore education and career opportunities;
- Appreciate the links between mental conceptions of knowledge and manual tasks informed by such knowledge;
- Act in a way that reflects justice, demo-cratic values, and respect for human dignity (the African concept of Ubuntu, respect, even reverence for others).

These outcomes are being made more specific in the context of various disciplines. We can see that content is de-emphasized, and that a range of attitudes, emotions, and social skills will somehow need to be "caught" by the assessment process. Traditional ways of testing, such as essay or multiple choice exams, can sample only a fraction of what we want to produce. Assessment must become wider. While a wider means of assessment must be conducted in some formal way using credits, it must also be practiced in the very arena of educational development—the classroom.

The concept of CA itself holds rich potential for teachers because it affirms high-order creative and critical thinking and because it embraces not only cognitive outcomes but affective and behavioral outcomes as well. It puts the learner more in control of his/her own learning. And while one cannot promise it will reduce the work for teachers, I have found, from observation as well as personal experiences, that it changes the work teachers do so that it reduces instructional drudgery and increases professional satisfaction. CA in practice can embody the global changes that affect the very nature of the classroom process, bringing it away from education as information and toward the full development of learner potential. It offers a way to provide differential input depending on the needs of learners, and can help to improve the quality of instruction even with large classes.

A CA approach can help to rectify the problem of mismatches between tests and classroom activities (Chapelle and Douglas 1993). When assessment is built into the instructional process, the confusion and frustration that test takers often face is reduced.

South Africa, like many other countries, has relied almost exclusively on a system of national examinations to identify the learner who "passes," meaning the learner who advances to the next level; who receives a qualification; who is admitted to a university or other tertiary institution; and even who may receive a bursary. These examinations were invariably written; they usually emphasised the essay, and they depended heavily on recall. Whatever the intent, the effect penalized unfairly those learners who could not express themselves fluently and accurately in their second language. It would not be far-fetched to suggest that South African education has not been unique in this regard.

The new policy of CA is aimed to bring out a paradigm shift in educational assessment in several ways. The central characteristic of this shift is the moving of assessment from a judgmental role

to a developmental role (National Education Ministry 1996b). This move reflects evolving ideas on the nature of assessment and its purposes.

In this article, key aspects of this paradigm are explored, followed by a case study involving ESL writing, a deeper look at the key strategies of self assessment and peer-assessment, and a word about the role of portfolios in continuous assessment.

Continuous Assessment Defined

As defined in the South African context, CA is conceptually similar to a term in wider use, alternative assessment. Following McTighe and Ferrara (1994), assessment refers to the process of gathering and integrating information about learners from various sources to help us understand these students and describe them. Teaching is one type of assessment. Evaluation is the process of making a judgment of a product, a response, or a performance based on criteria. CA in the classroom can be characterized as ongoing, informal assessment and evaluation combined.

CA can easily co-exist with traditional assessment. In fact, it needs many concepts of assessment to be effective, such as validity, reliability, and efficiency. Rather than select a few items for testing, CA focuses on tasks or projects which demand performance of the learners, as in Figure 1 below. Such activities allow the learner to demonstrate understanding and personal meaning of what has been taught. This approach is essential in a language classroom.

It is a challenge to the teacher to create authentic, engaging tasks that challenge the learner to use the language and develop related communicative abilities. CA can be further explored by contrasting it with traditional assessment, as in Figure 2 below.

The first dimension shown is the purpose of a test that we give to our learners. Traditional assessment is summative, meaning it can be seen as the culmination or “bottom line” of a unit of work that was covered. What the learner has done (or not done) remains unchangeable. If the test is along the lines of continuous assessment, it will probably be more formative, meaning that it is not the end of the line and that there is still time to change what learner and teacher have been doing in order to increase the likelihood of achievement.

The second dimension concerns the focus of attention of people interested in what goes on in the classroom, mainly the learners and the teacher, but including other stakeholders (see the very last dimension). At the traditional end, we concentrate on the product of instruction, usually the test. We look to the test to tell us how we have done. At the opposite CA end of the line, we centre our attention on the process of instruction. We look at how well the learner completed learning proj-ects and tasks during the course. We could look at the attitude s/he developed toward English, for this may presage ongoing language development. We could note whether the learner showed initiative, for example, by choosing extra reading, or by spending more time with English-speaking friends, or by using movies as a learning tool.

The rest of the dimensions represent further aspects on which to contrast continuous assessment against more familiar ways of testing. The reason for setting up such contrasts is to explore various meanings of continuous assessment. It can be readily seen that CA is not a one dimensional term.

Case Study: CA and ESL Writing

CA was applied to primary education students enrolled in a semester-long second-year ESL writing course at the university level. This course focused on personal development in English. Specific semester objectives centered on narrative and descriptive skills. Most learners were 19 years old, some not very mature about their goals. Most had English as their second language.

We, the two lecturers teaching different sections of the course, were tired of our students' repeating the same errors and having only modest commitment to their work. Typically, most of these learners wanted to know, "What do I have to do to pass?" But in contrast, we wanted them to understand that they were here to learn. We also wanted to reach more than the good learners, for whom method is less important. Therefore, we aimed for the middle group, the ones we felt needed us in order to learn. (We were not quite sure how we could help the poorest ones.)

We used these CA devices: self-assessment, peer-assessment, assessment by lecturer, portfolio, and reflective statement. We incorporated mid-term feedback from them in groups, and individual reflective questionnaires at the end of the term. More traditional assessments were the usual mandates of the university: a mid-term test and a final exam.

The students' assignment was to produce four short stories on topics of their own choice. We encouraged them to tell their own true stories, because truth can be stranger than fiction. We planned each class for the semester, specifying due dates, and we used our weekly class period to assist students in their work, helping them choose their topics, critiquing stories as examples, and teaching them aspects of narration, description, and, of course, English.

When the students brought in their first story (Draft 1), they filled out a self-assessment sheet, (See Figure 3 below) obviously on their own story. Then they rewrote their story in light of this assessment. They brought in Draft 2, exchanged stories, and filled out a peer-assessment form on someone else's story (See Figure 4 below). We encouraged them to do the assessment in pairs or groups. In light of their peer feedback, they rewrote and turned in the Final Draft, together with the other two drafts and two assessments, to be assessed by us, using the Evaluating by Lecturer form (See Figure 5 below). They kept each story packet to include in their portfolio. At the end they chose one story to be "published" in a class book (photocopied and plastic bound), and they submitted their portfolio, which included the typed story of their choice and a one-page written reflection explaining why they selected that story.

While we felt we had incorporated many aspects of good teaching (a genre approach, a process approach, a well organised course, appropriate exams, publication of the story), what made the course a resounding success ("a real hit," as one student said) was, in our opinion, the continuous assessment devices that we used. The most successful of those seemed to be the peer-assessment.

Most students gave it the top rating. For example, when they saw what their peers did not understand from their story, they worked hard to make their own feelings clear to the readers (peers rather than teachers).

The self-assessment forced them to reread their stories and make some improvements. By the time the instructors received these stories, they had been re-worked with most of the ordinary problems already solved. That left us free to concentrate on higher-level matters.

As the semester went on, we could see how the students took increasing ownership of their work. They wrote less for "homework" and more for their readers and themselves. They did soul-searching; they worked to find the best words. Contrary to previous genres, this program succeeded in engaging the students in the process. The difference was—continuous assessment.

Grading, the bane of teaching, actually became a joy; it was pleasurable to sit down to read decently written stories, to know the students better through their writing, and to see their progress through their drafts. We felt relieved of much of the "drudgery" of teaching. We created and displayed the specific marking criteria we used. Without making it a conscious objective, we had taught students how writing develops through drafts. It seemed to be a new learning experience, and a valuable, realistic one for them.

This example, sketchy though it is, shows some of the benefits inherent in the process of using CA:

1. Students began to work to communicate something of importance to themselves, rather than mainly to an authority figure. They began to do their work, not ours. The focus of evaluation shifted more to learners—and this, without our even discussing it.
2. A community of learners developed, through peer-assessment in giving and receiving extended written feedback. Class attendance improved, and sometimes the students sent the work to class even if the writer could not make it!
3. Students began to experience the drafts not as required rewrites (which they were), but as yet another chance to produce their best.

Self- and Peer-assessment Devices

These two devices are crucial to the continuous process. They provide for a wider range of input to learners than one person alone, such as the teacher, can give. They are skills to be developed that learners can take with them when they leave school and then use for life-long learning. They help one take control of one's own learning. As the South African education documents say, there is no underestimating their importance.

Both self- and peer-assessment devices are closely tied to specific classroom projects or tasks. One can get ideas from examples, but the teacher (in conjunction with the learner) must generate these devices based on the specific nature of the course. When learners understand how these devices work, they should be asked for their input in generating self- and peer-assessment

devices. Teachers need to work along with learners in using these devices, especially at the beginning. For the most part this work should be done within class time.

Self-assessment in language learning was pioneered by Oskarson (1978, 1984), an assessment which offers, among other things, numerical scales and checklists, many with examples connected to each question. This level of specificity seems quite useful as a model. In a literature review, Blanche and Merino (1989) found that self-appraisal exercises are likely to increase the motivation of the language learner. They also showed that people can assess themselves quite accurately, given the proper conditions. The most accurate self-test items described "concrete linguistic situations that the learner can size up in behavioral terms" (1989:324). This shows the value of a continuum of clear responses, which learners can use in assessing their own position.

Self-assessment can use a yes-no checklist, or have an open-ended format. There is really no "one right way," rather, something is needed to guide the learner's attention and stimulate thinking.

In our writing course, we found a checklist useful. It helped the students be sure the basics were there, such as the title, introduction, and conclusion. The best part was the "comment," where the writer offered his/her thoughts on the story or the writing process. The following are some sample entries: "After I reread it, I felt like I left out a few things. I don't know what. I'm working on it." "With this story, I've really opened my heart and written a part of my life." These comments show metacognition. They made the stories even more interesting for us to read and consider.

Our students, however, were not so impressed with the self-assessment device. They felt they were still blind to their own mistakes. However, it did make them reread their work, although they may not have seen the value of it.

Peer-assessment can be defined as a response in some form to other learners' work. It can be given by a group or an individual, and it can take any of a variety of coding systems: the spoken word, the written word, checklists, questionnaires, nonverbal symbols, numbers along a scale, colours, etc. Like anything else regarding communication, the choice of code depends on abilities of peer assessors at this point, on purpose, on topic, on teacher guidance, and on sensitivities in- volved. As in self-assessment, responses are guided by the teacher, or negotiated with other learners, so that assessors can find a direction for their feedback.

- reminds learners they are not working in isolation;
- helps create a community of learners,
- encourages interactive reading with reading logs;
- improves the product ("Two heads are better than one.");
- improves the process; motivates, even inspires;
- helps learners be reflective; and
- stimulates meta-cognition.

A literature review of peer-assessment in education indicates that most of what is reported comes from the workplace, some from tertiary education, and a bit from the school setting. Hence this

seems to be a topic that is wide open for research, especially as applied to second language learning. Given the increase in using groups in the classroom, however, perhaps important peer-assessment is being carried out in unreported, informal ways.

In our writing course example, we could find no existent peer-assessment form. We had to create our own, a three-page series of questions. In previous years, we observed learners making bland, even meaningless comments on the work of others, and sometimes the same comment on different pieces of writing. So we asked students to consider aspects of plot, theme, and character. We left blanks for them to quote the best descriptive passage and explain how it added to the story. We also asked for their personal reaction to the writing.

- Be sure that it is directed at the work rather than the person.
- Teach learners how to respond to the work of others.
- Focus on the positive (but do not omit the negative).
- Be authentic and tactful

The students found peer-assessment the most helpful. Many were amazed at finding different interpretations of what they had written.

A Nod to Portfolio Assessment

A portfolio can be defined as a meaningful collection of student work to give a fuller picture of what a learner has achieved. Gottlieb (1995) lists six portfolio prototypes in ascending order of complexity, depending on purpose: collecting, reflecting, assessing, documenting, thinking, and evaluating. Limited space prevents full explication, but it must be said that portfolios have come into wide use as, according to Gottlieb, "the vehicle by which students and teachers can organize, manage, and analyze life inside and out of school" (1995:12). Certainly portfolios embrace peer- and self-assessment, and they may become a workhorse of CA.

In our case study, we had students make up a portfolio of their four stories and related assessments (collecting), and they had to consider and choose one story for class publication, and tell us why they chose it (reflecting). They could see their own growth over time. As they put it, "The final story came more clearly to my mind and I thought about it much more." "I have grown more in touch with personal fears and thoughts, more able to access inner feelings." We defined criteria and displayed them in the classroom so that students could see what we thought was important in a story in this learning context, and we added our evaluations to the self- and peer-assessments (assessing). In future courses we plan to incorporate student ideas into these criteria. This "assessment portfolio" gave us a picture of what learners had accomplished over the semester, from the first to the fourth story. The act of choosing the best story for publication gave the learner a real-life chance to think and choose.

We used portfolios for Gottlieb's first three purposes. However, as the focus of CA moves from the classroom to the school and workplace, other types of portfolios come into play.

Implications of Continuous Assessment for Teachers

While CA is not a panacea for all that is wrong with education, nor for meeting all the needs of diverse learners in diverse societies, it does offer a great many benefits. CA reflects evolving theories of learning and teaching and educational outcomes and assessment. Underneath is a major paradigm shift involving less a transmission model of learning and more an active, constructive, questioning model which works toward developing the full potential of our learners. We need to familiarize ourselves with CA, to experiment with it.

As it is a change from the familiar authoritarian classroom that so many of us have experienced, we can expect some resistance. Such change has to be understood and accepted by society, and this demands a generous amount of communication with various stakeholders: parents, school governing bodies, administrators, funders, and not least, teachers and learners themselves. We can expect the suspicion that comes with change, as happened in the state of California (Baker, Linn, and Herman 1996:5), where subsequent research suggested that "lack of information and misunderstanding of the (new performance) assessment contributed as much to parental concerns as did the content and new format of the test."

Classroom teachers might introduce CA gradually, perhaps experimenting with self-assessment. One can give the learners a brief questionnaire asking them about their perceptions of progress and achievement and their attitude and values regarding a particular unit. One might help learners generate questions about one another's work for peer-assessment purposes. A teacher could write down his/her own criteria describing a good piece of work, an average piece, and an unsatisfactory piece. Examples of each stage would be even better. Let the learners add to the criteria, and use them for peer-assessment as well as for evaluation by teachers. Together with the learners, teachers can generate creative, authentic learning tasks that can be used as assessment tasks. In South Africa, where CA policy is soon to be fully implemented, whole schools are orienting themselves as a group to this assessment approach.

CA offers a way to cater to a diversity of learners in the language class. Diversity can derive from sociological factors, such as mother-tongue differences, culture, and place of origin, as well as individual factors, such as differing abilities, interests, and motivations, which arise in most classes anyway, no matter how homogeneously students are grouped. Assessment tasks can be done in various ways, and learners can select approaches that suit their interests and abilities. For example, in outlining a reading on transport in America, one learner may relate key ideas in a flow chart, another may use annotated drawings, and a third may use key phrases in point form. Others may even dramatize it.

Especially with large classes, learners can be assessed in groups as well as individually. Group process itself becomes part of the content to be assessed. Learning is social in nature; effective participation in class groups is known to bring about learning, and the ability to work as a cooperative team member is an essential skill not only for the class but also for enabling people to contribute to society. People learn by doing, and need to work together in a meaningful way in class.

Transformation of assessment is essential to the transformation of curriculum. CA in the English language classroom is one response to new global realities as they shape the classroom. As we move away from sitting in judgment on our learners, we need to keep finding and researching creative and authentic ways to make their development the primary focus of the assessment process.

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Figure 1

SOME CA DEVICES CHECKLIST OF LEARNER BEHAVIORS OR PRODUCTS

Journals

Reading logs

Videos of discussion of role play

Work samples

Dramatizations

Teacher observation

Anecdotal records

Interviews

Learner profiles

Progress cards

Reflective responses

Self-evaluation questionnaires

Peer-evaluation questionnaires

Portfolios

Figure 2

SOME CONTRASTS: TRADITIONAL VS. CONTINUOUS CLASSROOM ASSESSMENT		
DIMENSION	**TRADITIONAL ASSESSMENT**	**CONTINUOUS ASSESSMENT**
Purpose of test	Summative; if "sums up" what has been happening	Formative; it generates input to inform and guide teaching
	Judgemental; forces learnersto study	Developmental; diagnostic: directs instructional attention
Focus	Product of instruction	Process of instuction
	Teacher-created activity	Learner-created activity
	Heavy on memorization	Heavy on thinking, integration
	De-ccontextualised	Holistic
Feedback	A score or mark; final, no changing it.	A range of comments rom peers, teachers; happens during the process while still time to change
Test task	Typically written work	Typically range of tasks
	Medium: paper and pencil	Multimedia
	Narrow focus	Multidimensional
	Exercises (for the future)	Authentic (real life tasks for now)
	Formal	Informal

Classroom Management	Instrusive; interrupts class process	Integrated;part of class routine
	One-shot; only one chance to show comptence	Over time; chance to revise, improve, add
	Results need time to be determined	Feedback comes quickly
	Books closed	Reference available
Frame of Reference	Norm-reference	Croterion-reference
	Learner compared against norms based on other test-takers	Learner compared against specified criteria of achievement
Stakeholders	Learners, parents, principal receive results	Learners, parents, principal invited to help assess

Figure 3

	SELF-ASSESSMENT: WRITING THE SHORT STORY		
	My name:		
Student	My story:		
	Number of Story: 1 2 3 4		
	Date:		
Overview	1. Does my story have a wholeness to it?		Yes No
		Beginning	Yes No
		Middle	Yes No
		High point	Yes No
		Ending	Yes No
		Title	Yes No
	2. Have I edited it for language base?		Yes No
		Verb tense-consistent throughout	Yes No
		Person-consistent throughout	Yes No
		Grammatical correctness	Yes No
Focus	3. Have I read over my story for word choice?		Yes No
		Economy of words	Yes No
		Vivid words (sense imagery)	Yes No
		Good use of idiom	Yes No
Satisfaction	4. Am I satisfied that my story		Yes No

	says what I want it to say? 5. Have I opened up my heart? Yes No Comments _____ _____ _____ _____ _____ _____ _____ _____

Figure 4

	PEER-ASSESSMENT: WRITING THE SHORT STORY
Story	Name of story: _____ Writer of story: _____ Number of Story: 1 2 3 4 Date: _____
Plot	WHAT HAPPENS IN THE STORY. 1 Introduction • Does it introduce the main characters? Yes No • Does it show the setting? Yes No • Does it begin the conflict? Yes No 2 Climax-Moment of intensity, crisis, point of change. • What is it in this story? _____ 3 Conclusion • Does the story "feel" finished? Yes No • Explain _____
Charaters	4 Give the main characters (one, at most two) and describe each, using the following terms: (round characters, flat characters, caricatures, stereotypes [predictable, uninteresting, etc.]) • _____ 5 What is your (the reader's) feeling toward each of the main characters? • _____

Point of View

6 Who is telling the story? (omniscient narrator, first person a character in the story, other) What effect does this point of view achieve?

- _____

7 Does the writer change person anywhere in the story? Yes No

- If so, quote one example.

_____

Theme

8 What deeper human truth does this story explore?

- _____

Description

9 Does the writer show rather than tell?

Yes A lot A bit No

10 Quote the most vivid passage from this story.

- _____

11 Explain 2 or 3 of the means that the writer uses to achieve this vivid description.

- _____

12 What does this passage contribute to this story?

- _____

13 Quote one passage in which the writer shows rather than tells.

- _____

14 Please mark any language errors you found in the story. Quote two language errors that detracted from the story.

- _____
- How would you correct these errors?

_____

Overall

15 Do you like this story?

- Explain _____
- What did you enjoy most?

_____

- What did you enjoy least?

_____

16 Does the title "work" (reflect the main issue, draw the reader into the story, "catch" the reader)?

- Explain _____

17 What are the story's strengths?

- _____

18 How can this story be improved?

- _____

19 Please make a final, thoughtful comment to the writer.

- _____

Figure 5

	LECTURER EVALUATION WRITING
Student	Name: _____ Date: _____ Course Number: _____ Semester: _____
Evaluation	1. What you did particularly well. _____ _____ _____ _____ 2. What you particularly need. _____ _____ _____ _____ 3. Control of the English language. _____ _____ _____ _____ 4. Self-assessment. _____ _____ _____ _____ 5. Peer-assessment. _____ _____ _____ _____
Lecturer	Overall mark: _____ Lecturer: _____